YOUR MORTALITY IS SHOWING
March 4, 2001

FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

John M. Buchanan

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

Henry David Thoreau
Walden

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Romans 10: 8b-13
Luke: 4-13

"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness." (Luke 4:1)

Dear God, as we begin our Lenten journey by following Jesus into the wilderness, be near to us. Give us courage to confront our doubts and fears. Hold us up when we stumble. Give us courage and strength and startle us anew with the power and the passion of your amazing love for us, in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

One of life's most difficult experiences is helplessly standing by a loved one struggling with terminal illness. Popular author Anne Lamott's best friend was dying of cancer. Lamott was with her daily. She went through the range of emotions that beset us in that situation: helplessness, depression, anger. She made an appointment with Pammy's doctor and he said the most surprising thing: "Watch her carefully right now, because she is teaching you how to live."

Lamott reflected later:

> **"I remind myself of this when I cannot get any work done: to live as if I'm dying because the truth is we are all terminal on this bus. To live as if we are dying . . . . Time is so full for people who are dying in a conscious way; full in a way life is for children. They spend big round hours. So, instead of staring miserably at the computer screen trying to will my way into having a breakthrough, I say to myself, "Okay, hmmm, let's see. Dying tomorrow. What should I do today?" (*Bird by Bird,* p.179)**

Or, as someone succinctly put it "Live each day as if it were your last."

There is, in fact, something about the limits of life that makes it more precious, something about the awareness of life's inevitable end that makes living it more intentional, more meaningful, more pregnant with possibility.

Psychiatrist and philosopher, Rollo May, wrote a lot about it.

"The most excruciating joy is accompanied by the consciousness of the immanence of death," he wrote. "Love is a reminder of our own mortality. In his classic, *Love and Will,* May cites Abraham Maslow who, while recuperating from a near fatal heart attack, reflected:

> **"The confrontation with death—and the reprieve from it—makes everything look so precious, so sacred, so beautiful, that I feel more strongly than ever the impulse to love it, to embrace it, and to let myself be overwhelmed by it. My river has never looked so beautiful . . . . Death and its ever-present possibility, makes love, passionate love, more possible. I**

wonder if we could love passionately, if ecstasy would be possible at all, if we knew we'd never die." (*Love and Will,* p.99-101)

It's why the Christian church for centuries, has observed Lent, the forty days before Easter, not counting Sundays, a season of the church year whose purpose is to remind us of two unpleasant realities that we'd rather not think about—sin and death: the fact that our relationship with God and our relationships with one another are in need of healing, and, in Anne Lamott's imagery, "everyone on this bus is terminal."

It began last Wednesday. Ash Wednesday we call it. It used to be pretty much a Roman Catholic monopoly. Presbyterians, in the old days, didn't pay much attention to Lent and certainly didn't walk around one February Wednesday with a smudge on our foreheads. We're recovering the custom and the symbolism, some of us are. Calum MacLeod, who preached here on Ash Wednesday evening wondered out loud about what his grandfather, an Elder in the Church of Scotland for forty years, would think about imposing ashes in a Presbyterian Church. I know what my grandmother McCormick would think and probably is thinking, wringing her hands in horror, right now, convinced that in spite of all her efforts, Rome finally got me. In any event, we walked forward, several hundred of us did, and one of the ministers made the sign of the cross on our foreheads, with a smudge of ashes and oil. Ashes—the ancient symbol of grief and death and sin. And to make matters worse, or better, depending on your perspective—the ministers looked us each in the eye and said the words that have been said at that moment for centuries—"Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return."

After the service Wednesday evening, three volunteers were removing the communion ware from the table and tidying up. A distraught young couple appeared in the South Transept—they had come "for ashes," and were stricken when they learned the service was over and the ministers gone.

One of the volunteers—a Roman Catholic, a former nun, now a school teacher, married a Presbyterian—and spends a lot of time here. She knew exactly what to do. She looked at Larry, one of the other volunteers, and said, "Your ashes are still good. They'll do just fine." She placed her thumb on his forehead, removed some of his ashes and pressed them on the foreheads of the couple. And for good measure said, "Remember, from ashes we come and to ashes we shall return." God bless you. Now on your way. And they smiled and returned to Michigan Avenue.

Christianity maintains that the healthiest thing you can do about your own soul, your relationship with God and with others, is bring some honesty to the table by acknowledging the reality, and the power, of sin and death.

"Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return." "Sobering language," Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor calls it. "It is hard for a healthy adult to hear, but when it is said for a three-year old child, or a person gaunt from chemotherapy, it can sound too harsh for words. It is language that yanks away all our deceit about death." (*Speaking of Sin, The Lost Language of Salvation,* p.71)

After the service, she says she stumbles out of the church and walks blinking back into the world where we have jobs to do. A few people will helpfully tell her that she has dirt on her forehead. She responds, "Yes, I know. That's my mortality. I thought I'd let it show today."

No danger, Brown quips, that Ash Wednesday and Lent will be commercialized. No danger that Hallmark will design a card or that shopkeepers will dress their windows in sack cloth and ashes. (p.71) These are not market-friendly concepts. Entertainment is a market-friendly concept even in religion. Neal Gabler, author and movie critic wrote a piece in *The New York Times* about two Oscar front-runners, Gladiator and Traffic, and observed that both motion pictures are remarkably similar beneath the surface. Both tap the same well-spring of discontent and anxiety in modern America and both deal with the same subject—each tells the story of a society in the throes of amusing itself to death and the cost of doing so. Gabler wrote, "It is no secret Americans are obsessed with entertainment and, if TV viewing is any gauge, probably spend more time distracting themselves from life than engaging in it. Entertainment value is the standard by which things are measured, be it education, politics, or even religion." (*The New York Times,* Sunday, February 18, 2001)

Human mortality is not very entertaining. In fact, our culture goes to great lengths to deny and disguise it. We don't even like to say the word "death." Woody Allen said, "I don't mind the thought of dying . . . I just don't want to be there." Unlike our predecessors in all of human history, we don't ever see it. It happens not in the midst of everyday life, but mostly in an antiseptic, institutional environment. A friend of mine, a hospice physician who deals with human mortality every day, all day, was expressing impatience with the fact that newly minted clergy don't seem even to have thought about the fact that people die.
"They seem genuinely surprised," she said, "that death happens here. I've always been tempted to ask them, "Where do you think these people go?"

At the beginning of his ministry, immediately following his baptism, the event that affirmed for him who he was and what God wanted of him, Jesus learned about mortality. The text for the first Sunday in Lent is always the same—Jesus in the wilderness, tempted by Satan.

It's a fascinating scene. Jesus, at the age of 30, had walked into the Jordan River and his cousin John had poured water over him, and in that moment Jesus had a clear sense that God has a claim on his life, he had a vocation—to be God's son, to live absolutely according to God's will. Full of the Spirit of God, he went into the wilderness for forty days—led by the Spirit, driven by the Spirit, Matthew and Mark put it.

Wilderness suggests a thick, impenetrable forest with no path, no way to follow. In fact, this wilderness is the opposite, miles and miles, as far as the eye can see, of barren, arid, rocky desert, no contrast, no green, no noticeable life. It's south of Jericho. I've seen it, from a bus window at 70 mph. Even there its utter barrenness is frightening. It is also absolutely quiet. If you sit still in this wilderness, the silence is literally deafening, so silent that you hear a humming in your head which, I am told, is the sound of your own nervous system.

He was tempted, three times, by Satan, three curiously benign temptations: to turn stones into bread and resolve his hunger, nothing particularly evil about that; to seek political power and preside over a literal kingdom of justice and righteousness, not a bad idea, actually; to demonstrate dramatically his power and God's favorable inclination toward him, to establish a little credibility; jump from the temple. No harm will come: God will preserve and protect.

The devil even quotes scripture to make his argument and Jesus interestingly quotes scripture right back, a kind of Bible contest. Jesus wins, however, because he's quoting Torah, the law: Deuteronomy.

--One does not live by bread alone
--Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him
--Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

And at the end of the day—forty days in that wilderness, Jesus has learned about limits, the limits beyond which he must not and cannot go, if he is to be faithful to God and to himself. And the final limit, very clear when you are in that wilderness and you're starving to death—the limits on human life.

It was a lesson he had to learn. He did not have forever. There was a terminus point in his life. He didn't know when it would be, but it was out there. As it turned out, it was only three years away. But by learning about it he also learned that critical lesson, that his life was precious, that every day mattered, that every word spoken, every gesture, every relationship was sacred and holy and irretrievable.

He learned about his own mortality at the age of thirty.

We don't have a daily record. We don't know very much actually about how he lived each day. We know about a few days, we know some of the things he did and said. But I like to think that after that time in the wilderness, he lived every day, every minute of every day with a high and holy intentionality.

Knowing about your mortality can do that. Alfred Delp was a Jesuit, arrested and sentenced to death by the Nazis for participating in a resistance organization. He kept a diary which was secreted out of his prison and published after the war. He wrote:

> **"One has to keep reminding oneself that death is around the corner. Condemned to death. The thought refuses to penetrate. But . . . I am now a man internally free and far more genuine and realized than I was before.**
>
> **. . . one thing is becoming gradually clear—I must surrender myself completely . . . This is seed time, not harvest. . . .**
>
> **God keep me in his providence and give me strength to meet what is before me." (*The Prison Meditation of Father Alfred Delp, S. J.,* p.159-165; in *Weavings,* May/June, 1980)**

In the wilderness, Jesus learned that there were limits and that one day his life would end. And he learned one thing further—the devil quoted Psalm 91—"He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you . . . On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."

What Jesus had to have learned out there in the blazing sun, and the howling night wind, was that those words did not guarantee his physical safety. He learned a lesson we all must learn sooner or later, namely that God does not protect us from suffering, illness, tragedy and death.

"he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler," the Psalm says; "under his wings you will find refuge. . . Because you have made the Lord your refuge . . . no evil shall befall you."

What Jesus learned in the desert was that evil most certainly does "befall you," that his own life would be particularly subject to it; that at the end of the road for him was a cross.

What he learned was that whatever happened, God would not abandon him, that whatever limits he had to endure, the ultimate limit of his own death, he was ultimately safe in the love that would never leave him, love that would hold him up and give him the strength and courage he needed to live each day thereafter with a sense of his mortality and therefore with a sense of each day's precious beauty.

You and I should spend time in the wilderness to learn that.

Jane Kenyon, a distinguished American poet learned it. Dying of leukemia at the age of 48, she worked with her husband, Donald Hall, also a very distinguished poet, to compile what she knew would be her last volume of poems. She titled the book *Otherwise,* after one of the poems:

"I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise."

One day it will be otherwise. May we live, until then, with a sense of our mortality and therefore a sense of the precious beauty of each day. One day it will be otherwise and on that day may we offer up all our days to the Most High, our fortress, the One in whose unconditional love we are forever safe—forever free, under whose wings is our eternal refuge.

Thanks be to God.

Prayers of the People – March 4 2001 The Reverend Calum I. MacLeod

We come before you O lord at the beginning of this Holy Season
knowing that you have called your disciples to go forward with you
on the way to the cross.

So hear our thanksgiving for your Son whose journey to the cross reflects the love
of One who would lay down his life for his friends, and who would call us friends.

And hear our thanksgiving for the faithful who
throughout the ages have sought to follow that road
since you first took the journey those many years ago.

And hear our prayer of thanks
that we are to be counted in the line of the saints.
Grant that we would be given ears to hear your gospel
and strength to stay true on the road until we come to our Calvary.

And save us O Lord, in all that we do as your disciples.
Save us from false familiarity with your journey.
May we never presume to step into your shoes,
but make us small enough to fit our own
and to walk in love and wonder behind you.

Come close gracious God and hear our prayers for the world, the church and your people.

You walked into a place of temptation, Lord.
We pray for a world tempted by power and popularity;
for politicians tempted to compromise the well-being of the largest number
for the comfort of the few;
for industrial leaders tempted to sacrifice the self-replenishing earth
for short-term increases in profitability.
Strengthen them with your hand to love your people and your creation.

You walked in hunger, Lord.
We pray for the people of our world whose bellies are not filled this day,
for communities struggling to dig for clean fresh water,
we pray for those who hunger for an end to bombs and conflict and hate.
Bring near the day when the hungry will be satisfied.

You walked in the presence of idolatry, Lord.
We pray for your Church in all its places, styles and traditions.
Keep her free from idolizing the world's ways
and set her heart on your self-giving love.
We pray for your people gathered here.
Inspire our mission life, strengthen our relationships
and make us all ready to forgive and be forgiven.

You walked alone, Lord.
Be close to all who today live primarily in the context of loneliness.
The loneliness of illness and fear, of suffering and rejection;
Stay beside all who near death.
Let us hear again the promise that
nothing in all creation can separate us from your love in Christ,

and in his name and with his words we pray together saying...Our Father